

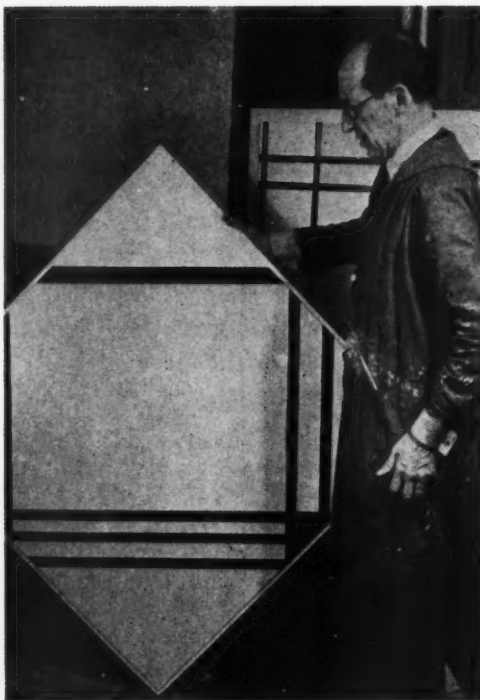
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART BULLETIN, SPRING 1945, VOLUME XII, NO. 4

# PIET MONDRIAN

What a retrospective view of forty years of Piet Mondrian's painting brings home most forcefully to us is not the ardent self-restraint and singlemindedness of his work—these are already commonplace—but the intimacy with which his roots are bound up in the most firmly established traditions of his native Netherlands and the unassailable logic with which he spanned the gap between Mesdag and the Barbizon School influences of his early years and his last finished canvas, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.

Piet Mondrian came of a family of painters. But none of his immediate family, as he said, "was willing to give up everything for art." He was the oldest of four brothers and a sister. His father was a schoolteacher at Amersfoort, near Amsterdam, where Piet Mondrian was born March 7, 1872. His father, he recalled, "was always drawing, though it was only a hobby with him." His uncle Frits Mondriaan, however, was a professional painter. And it was he who gave Mondrian his first lessons in painting in oils when he was about fourteen. From the outset Mondrian was deeply interested. But when it became clear that Mondrian wanted to devote his life to art his father tried to dissuade him since there was no money to pay for his studies. Finally a family friend agreed to arrange matters so that, at the age of nineteen, Mondrian left the little village of Winterswyk near the German border, where his family had settled eleven years earlier, to return to Amsterdam.

There he spent three years attending day and evening courses at the Academy of Fine Arts. His master was August Allebé, the teacher of such well-known figures of the 'nineties in Holland as Jan Veth, the essayist and art historian, der Kinderen and Jan Toorop. But at the time Mondrian's attention was primarily concentrated on technical and scientific drawing. His father insisted that if he intended to follow art as a career he should safeguard himself with a diploma in drawing, painting, art history and anatomy which would qualify him to teach.



Mondrian in his New York studio, 1943, showing "Place de la Concorde."

"At twenty-two began a very difficult time for me. To make a living I did many kinds of work—bacteriological drawings used for text books and class rooms, portraits, copies of pictures in museums, and taught as well, and then I began to sell landscapes. It was a hard struggle but I managed to make a living and was glad to be able to make just enough money to be able to do what I wanted to do."\*

\* Jay Bradley, "Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944." *Knickerbocker Weekly*, Vol. III, no. 51, Feb. 14, 1944. p. 16.

COVER: *Composition in White and Gray*. 1926. Oil. 44 3/4 x 44 1/4". Lent by Miss Katherine S. Dreier. The first Mondrian to be publicly exhibited in the United States.

His idol at the outset was Breitner, the painter of urban Amsterdam—old quarters of the city under snow, canals bordered by venerable houses with countless staring windows in the soft, melancholy atmosphere of rainy weather or spring thaw. Breitner was regarded a naturalist, or realist, and in this character had a particular attraction for Mondrian.

Another important influence which Mondrian claimed he shared with practically all his contemporaries of those years in Amsterdam was that of the Barbizon School paintings collected by Mesdag and placed on public view about the close of the century. Even in his seventies Mondrian still recalled an unfinished Daubigny among them—a painting of sheep in the early morning, which he had "thought fine."

But with the first years of the new century fresh associations and more venturesome approaches began to have their effects. Jan Toorop, who had been one of the leaders of the countermovement against Impressionism in The Hague in 1890, had also been a student of Mondrian's master Allebé. Through the exhibitions and discussions of the Brussels *Société des Vingt*, Toorop became acquainted with all the major directions of the last decades of the nineteenth century from the work of Seurat on the one hand to that of the French symbolist poets and syntheist painters on the other; from the work of the English Pre-Raphaelites to that of the Austrian Gustave Klimt. Out of his early eclectic phase Toorop in the middle 'nineties had evolved a linear idealism which, it has been said, has influenced directly or indirectly half the vanguard painters of Holland. Even today we see it clearly followed in the work of Johan Thorn Prikker and Willem van Konijnenburg—and it certainly underlies certain explorations of such men as van der Leek, Doesburg, and at a greater distance perhaps Mondrian.

By the first years of the twentieth century Toorop had combined a pointillist technique with these linear stylizations. This was the period in which Mondrian came to know him. Toorop was applying his paint in "spots," as Mondrian described it, "pure colors in little blocks—not so painterly as Seurat." The older painter had undoubtedly an important

influence on Mondrian. When Mondrian was asked what he thought of Hodler, for example, even in his seventieth year he replied: "Toorop liked him very much." As artists they drew apart after Mondrian's return from Paris; but they remained close friends for years.

Jan Sluyters also exerted an important influence upon Mondrian's pre-Paris years. In Dutch art of Mondrian's early years there were two clearly opposed camps: the "pictorial romantics," on the one hand, and on the other the stylizers, followers of Toorop such as Konijnenburg and Prikker who outlined their forms arbitrarily with heavy contours, or actually divided the surface of their paintings into distinct compartments of color. Sluyters belonged to the former group—the "pictorial romantics." He was temperamental, eclectic, sensual—a student of Breitner whom he always regarded his master, but essentially an expressionist of a virtuosity that rivalled van Dongen's in his early days. In 1906 Sluyters went to Paris, where he discovered "modern art"—Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec and others. He came back full of his enthusiasm and then developed between him and Mondrian a friendship which was to last for several years.

In spite of such associations, Mondrian's work did not begin to show definite effects of their influence until after 1906. Even as late as that we find the dark conventional palette of his early days in a characteristically conventional Dutch landscape such as *River Scene* or the distantly van Gogh sentiment of *Night* (page 4). But soon after Toorop's influence and that of Sluyters began to appear. Mondrian's next step was landscapes and still lifes in pure shining colors. An old village church in Zeeland stood in lavender shadow rising in relief against a bright sky. In a dune landscape he put natural colors aside. He depicted the dune, pure blue, as a gently rising wave in which the sky was reflected—because as he said that expressed more completely than the yellow sand the purity and calm of the scene.

At the time there was still a definite element of the Symbolist in Mondrian—perhaps an outgrowth of his association with Toorop, or of the interest in Hindu philosophy which had also engaged him over



*Night.* c.1908. Oil. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Collection Mrs. Marie Johanna Ootmar.

several years. But in this there was already an anticipation of much later developments.

For example, in a flower piece of about 1908 (page 5) he tried to express himself by symbolic means. He wanted to convey the idea of life and death through a great white fading chrysanthemum seen against a bright background near a black curtain. The flower was like a ghostly corpse in silhouette—withered, the green leaves hanging down like the bony arms of a skeleton; with some of its petals drooping along the stem, some curved gently inward.

But there was still, he felt, too great an element of naturalism in his art. In a letter written in 1916 regarding this canvas, he said: "and as to what you say about the appearance of a flower: you are surprised that I wish to dissect the delicate beauty and transform it into vertical and horizontal lines. I very readily admit your wonder, but it is not my intention to depict the delicate beauty. That which in the flower affects us as beauty and does not arise from the deepest part of its being, is beautiful but not the deepest beauty. I, too, find the flower beautiful in its physical appearance; but there is hidden in it a deeper beauty. I did not know how to depict this when I painted the dying chrysanthemum with the long stem. I formed it through emotion and the emotion was human, perhaps universally human;

later I found too much emotion in this work and painted a blue flower differently. This stood stiffly staring and already promised more of the immutable" (page 5).

Gradually, however, this conventional symbolism gave way to a technical exploration of the divisionist technique with which he had come in contact either through Toorop's work, or pre-fauve Matisse. A new clarity of palette appears.

In 1910 another of his friends, Conrad Kickert the art critic on the *Telegraaf*, the most advanced paper of the time in Holland, urged him to move to Paris. Kickert was also a painter who knew the Paris art world. It was he who had brought the Matisses to Holland two years earlier which had so deeply impressed Mondrian.

In Paris at the time of Mondrian's arrival Cubism, full fledged, was beginning to make itself seriously felt. Kickert was a great admirer of Picasso. And it was Kickert's enthusiasm that introduced Mondrian to the work of the Cubists in general. Mondrian was immediately attracted by it. Just as the Cubists were reacting from the emotional excesses of the fauves in the direction of a subdued palette, Mondrian had come to feel that while the pure colors he was employing in his work just before his departure from Holland were beginning to approximate the "intensity" he sought, they "still expressed too much



*Chrysanthemum. c.1907-08. Oil. Not in exhibition.*

individual emotion." Cubism pointed the way. "Then," he continued in his letter about the chrysanthemums, "I had a period of sober colors; gray and yellow began to make my line more fixed." He was especially influenced by the work of Léger and later, Picasso. "Of all the abstractionists I felt only the Cubists had discovered the right path."

Nevertheless, then as always after, Mondrian remained the solitary seeker. Kickert and Schelfhout, another fellow-countryman, brought him to Léger's studio. Léger asked him to go to see Picasso, but he found an excuse not to go. He explained later, "because Picasso was a man of such strong personality that I felt he would dominate me and so I did not go to meet him."\* The Cubists had found a way out of conventional descriptive painting towards the creation of a new pictorial reality. But Mondrian found Cubism "still more or less natu-

\* Jay Bradley. *Op. cit.*

ralistic," and too little concerned with "the logical consequences of its own discoveries." He saw the possibility of carrying their enterprise to a logical conclusion. And Mondrian's way and that of the Cubists gradually drew apart.

In July 1914 Mondrian, totally unaware of the impending crisis, left Paris to pay a visit to his father in Holland. He had planned a brief stay, taking only valises with him. But when war was declared and the frontier closed his family was upset by the thought of his departure. He remained; and the war kept him there for the next five years.



*Chrysanthemum. c.1908-09. (dated 1906 by P.M. in 1942) Oil. 26% x 16%". Lent by Miss Ella Winter.*

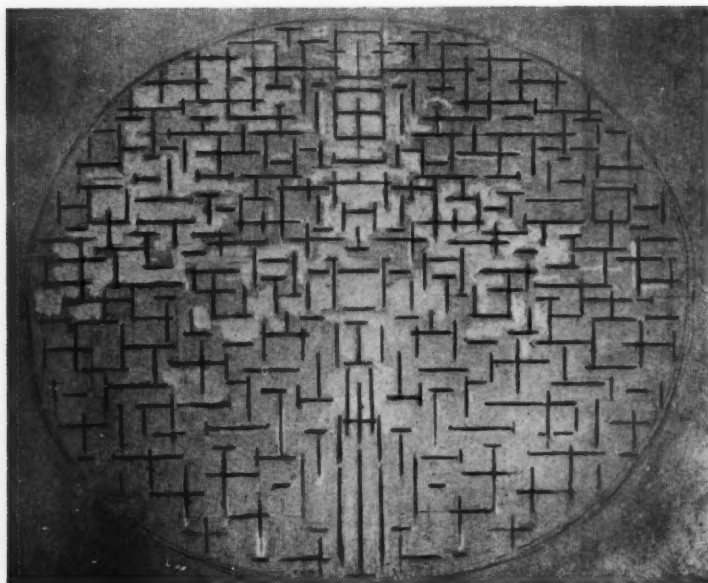


During his period of research in Paris as his interest in orthodox Cubism paled, Mondrian had made many sketches from nature of trees, houses in the process of demolition, and church façades. Later, in his studio, he would abstract certain elements from these sketches, further simplify them, then recompose them with primary consideration to their relations and rhythmic organization on the surface of the canvas. In the earliest of these, color was completely disregarded. But only temporarily. As he wrote shortly afterward (again in words which might apply to any of the boldest of his essays of ten or twenty years later) "I am not abandoning color, but I want it just as intense as possible. I am not neglecting line, but I want it in its strongest expression. The flaccid line in the natural appearance of things is a relaxation of form." Several of these canvases were exhibited at the *Salon des Indépendents* in Paris. And when he withdrew from his father's home to Domburg in the autumn of 1914, he kept on in this direction, making studies of churches and buildings after nature, studies of the

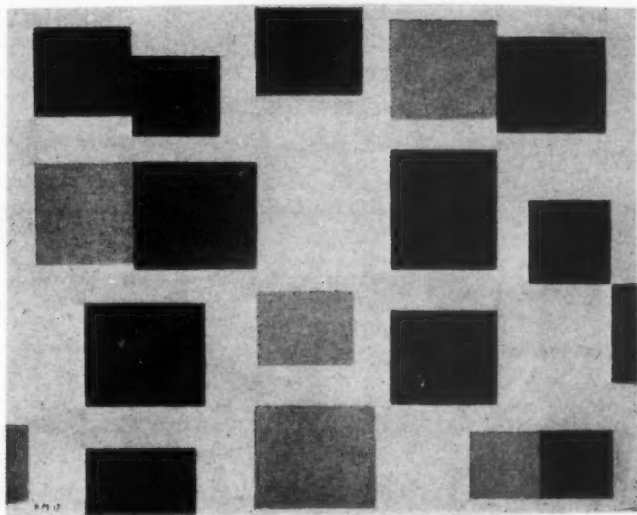
pier and the incoming waves on the beach, and abstract compositions derived later in his studio from these sketches, such as *Pier and Ocean*.

And as he proceeded with this research he excluded, more and more, all curved lines from his painting, till his compositions consisted of verticals and horizontals. From his observation of sea, sky and stars, he sought to produce pictorial equivalents of their physical relationships through a multiplicity of crossing vertical and horizontal lines.

Yet even in such work Mondrian felt he was "working as an impressionist." Color in his cubist work like the Cubist's own color was applied in an impressionist fashion. There was a restlessness in it, a response to individual emotion in the brushwork, which he hoped to eliminate in order to achieve that ideal calm he envisaged as the product of an equilibrium of opposed forces of line and color in composition. In 1916 while staying at Loenen, near Amsterdam, he met van der Leek, a follower of der Kinderen in the direction of linear stylization. Van der Leek at the time was still painting forms



*Pier and Ocean*. 1914. Crayon drawing with wash. 34 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 44". Museum of Modern Art. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.



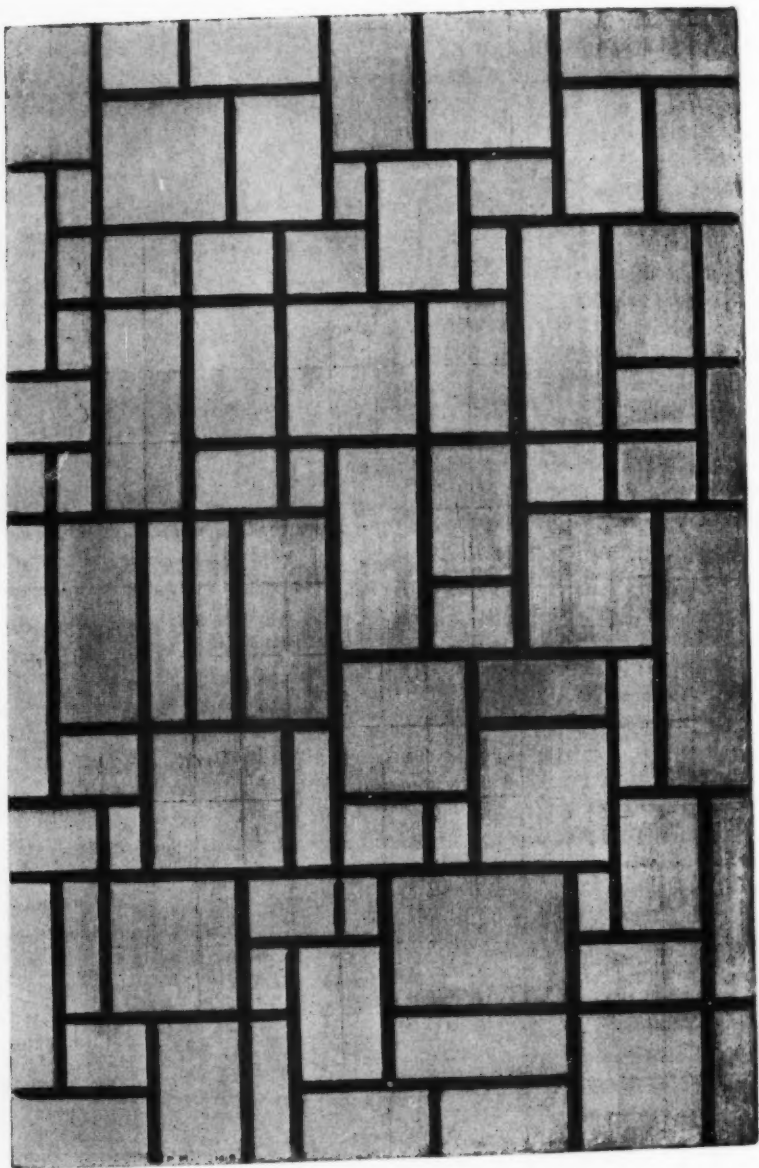
*Composition. 1917. Oil. The Kroller-Muller Foundation. The Netherlands. Not in exhibition.*

more naturalistic than those of Mondrian but in flat areas of pure color. Mondrian saw in this approach a solution to his problem; a means to escape the emotional restlessness of the Impressionists' technique. And from this time forward he clung steadfastly to such unbroken flat areas of color in every phase of his work; and van der Leek, in exchange, adopted Mondrian's concept of crossed vertical and horizontal lines as a basis for his composition, until he returned to a naturalistic idiom a few years later.

Shortly after Mondrian's meeting with van der Leek he had a message from Theo van Doesburg from Utrecht. Doesburg had planned to start a review and hoped that both Mondrian and van der Leek would join him in his project. Mondrian had been writing for himself for some time and welcomed the opportunity to have his theories on painting published. The result was the foundation of *De Stijl*, the magazine around which so many of the most adventurous efforts in all the arts were to center in Holland during the next few years. Doesburg was a painter who had written on art frequently for various periodicals. And it was primarily as the propagandist of the *de Stijl* movement that he

had his value. He had an inexhaustible curiosity regarding new movements in the arts. English Vorticism was as welcome to the editor of *De Stijl* as Hungarian Constructivism; he was as happy to lecture on the same platform with the Merzist Schwitters, as to publish a piece on Futurist music. And through Doesburg's efforts architects such as van Eesteren, Oud, Rietveld, Wils, and van't Hoff won a hearing in Holland and the neoplastic researches of Mondrian and Doesburg's own elementarism were spread throughout Central Europe. But Mondrian remained the painter of the movement.

Still Mondrian had not satisfied himself. Even after solving his problem of color application through his lessons from van der Leek he found himself confronted by still another difficulty. The surfaces of his color areas were now flat and tranquil just as the background was, but he still found himself faced by two independent elements in his picture: a detached plane and a background and the two separated by a suggestion of space (above). This produced an effect of recession into the picture plane. How was he to fuse these two into the unity he sought?



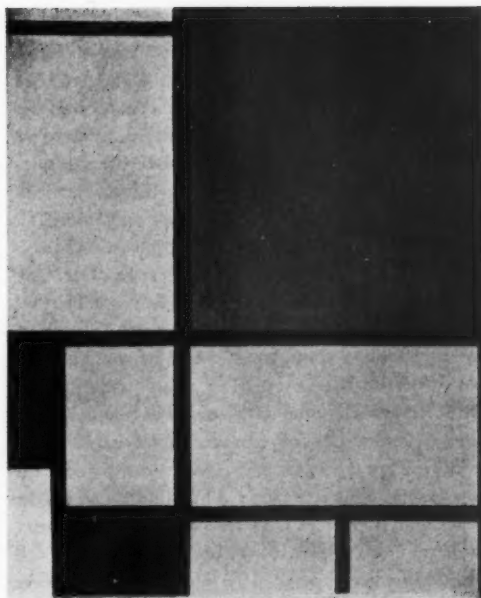
*Composition in Gray*. 1919. Oil.  $38\frac{1}{4} \times 24\frac{1}{2}$ . Lent by Harry Holtzman.



The solution was his next major step. He "brought the rectangles together (opposite); space became white, black or gray; form became red, blue or yellow. Uniting the rectangles was equivalent to continuing the verticals and horizontals of the former period over the entire composition. It was evident that rectangles, like all particular forms, obtrude themselves and must be neutralized through the composition. In fact, rectangles are never an aim in themselves but a logical consequence of their determining lines which are continuous in space: they appear spontaneously through the crossing of horizontal and vertical lines. Later, in order to abolish the manifestation of planes as rectangles, I reduced my color and accentuated the limiting lines, crossing them one over the other (page 10). Thus the planes were not only cut and abolished, but their relationships became more active."

And this was the basis of Mondrian's mature style which, with relatively minor modifications, was to be his vehicle down to his last unfinished work, his 1944 *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (page 12).

Mondrian's fundamental aim in art was to transcend the particular to express the universal. He was the great uncompromising classicist of the early 20th century. Romantic art deals with the particular; for Mondrian the particular was a trammel, a fetter. He felt that naturalistic forms in painting were limited forms by the very definition of their specific references "the particularities of form and natural color evoke subjective states of feeling which obscure pure reality." For Mondrian reality was that essential quality we find in nature, not its surface appearances. The appearances of natural things were constantly changing, but this living quality, this inner reality of nature, was constant—universal. In his opinion a truly universal art should provide through its own medium an equivalent for this inner reality, or living quality, rather than merely a reflection of surface features. In other words, he wanted a cleaner universal basis of expression than



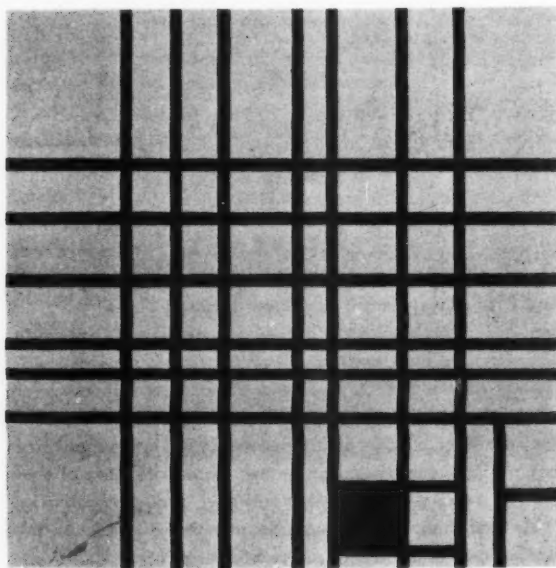
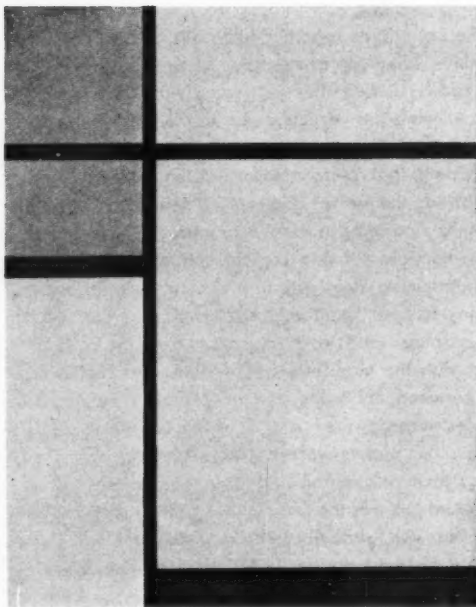
*Composition in Gray, Blue, Yellow and Red. 1921. Oil. 19 3/4 x 15 1/4". Lent anonymously.*

naturalistic representation could give him—a purer base for the universal expression of the classicist than any painter before him had achieved. This is what he meant by his frequently repeated insistence that we must "destroy the particular form." This is why, in his art, he pursued the tangent of the arc described by the cubist movement toward a further simplification of elements, instead of returning with it to a relative naturalism after its first severe disciplinary phase had served its end.

Cubism was not the solution, but besides pointing a step in the direction of destroying the particular form it also clarified Mondrian's basic problem for him. Through Cubism he came to realize that he might achieve an equivalent for the living quality or inner reality of nature through an interplay of contrasting pictorial elements and through the tension of their relationships. He saw that in a picture the only dependable source of energy for such an inter-

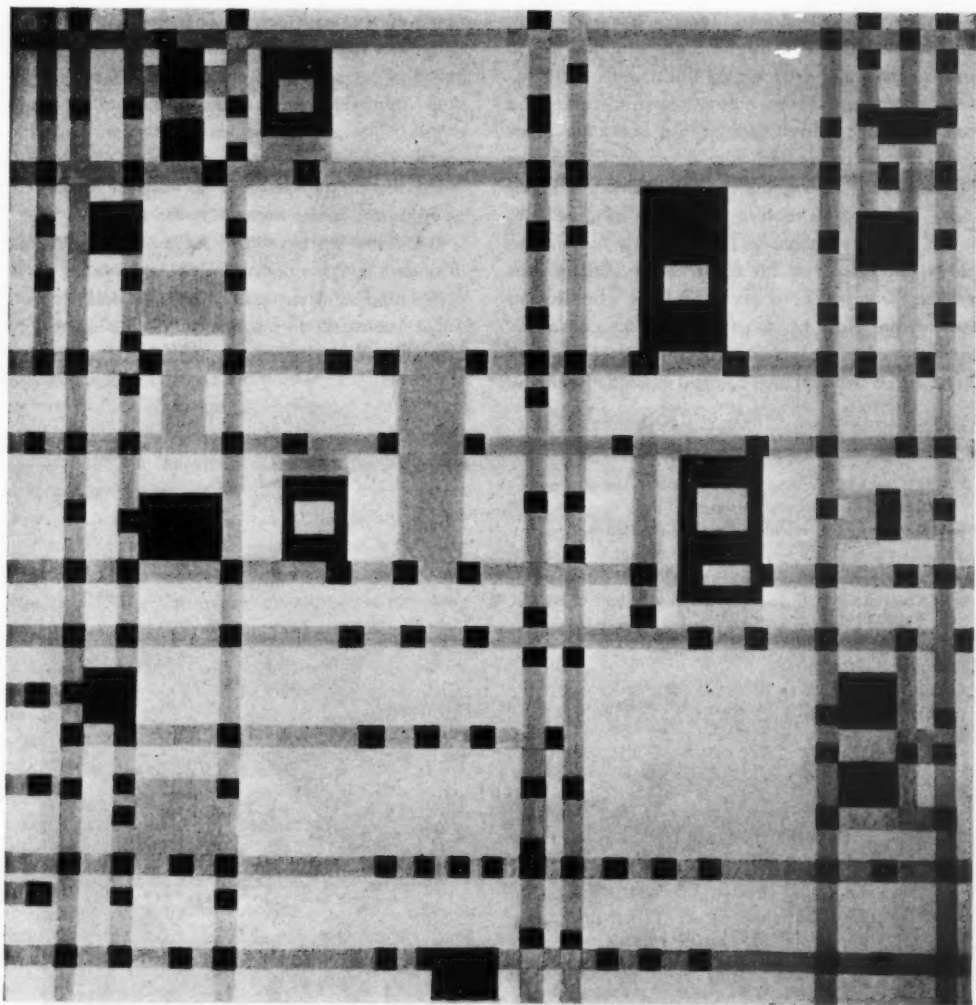
play of forces lay in a persistent, equilibrated contrast between an invariable element and a group of variables. He found that for him the only constant relation in painting was the right angle. Variety he saw most universally expressed through contrasting simple forms and primary colors, never naturalistically limited. And on these bare premises all the work of Mondrian's last twenty-five years was based.

At times he moved too far in one direction for his own satisfaction, at times too far in another. The crosses of vertical and horizontal lines of his first post-cubist period were "too restless" (page 6). The large white canvases of the late 'twenties and early 'thirties composed of a single rectangle of black lines with one, two, or three meticulously placed rectangles of primary color were "too static"—"too monumental" in his own words (page 10). His 1918 "checkerboard" compositions where only black and white were used were "too far from reality." In his later pictures he felt the solid black lines oppressive (page 10); and in his first New York painting we see these black lines eliminated in favor of colored bands.



Above: *Composition in White, Blue and Red*. 1933. Oil. 16 1/4 x 13 1/4". Lent by Sidney Janis.

Left: *Composition in White and Blue*. 1936-42. Oil. 24 1/2 x 23 1/4". Collection Harry Holtzman.



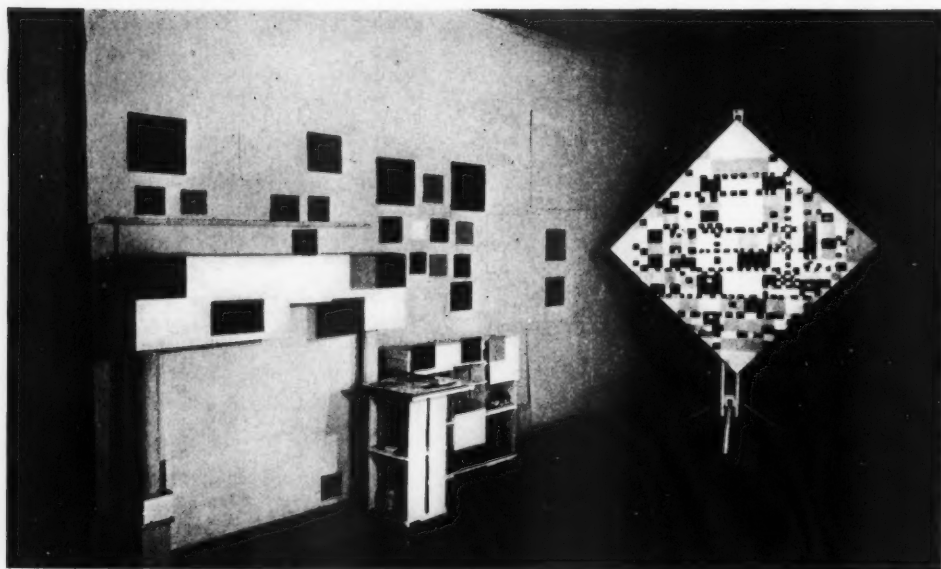
*Broadway Boogie-Woogie. 1942-43. Oil. 50 x 50". Museum of Modern Art. Given anonymously.*

Finally in his *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, 1943, and his unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (page 12), we find him drawing all the strands of his research together. Here we have the restlessness and variety of minor form that he had in his first post-cubist phase contrasted with a constant dominant rectangularity throughout the composition. The primary colors of his mature years are mingled with softer, secondary squares reminiscent in tone of the golds and grays of his cubist work. And he has broken the aggressiveness of his lines, abandoning not only the black but even breaking the continuous character of the colored bands of his first New York work with a brilliant multicolored mosaic effect. The

whole canvas now dances with variously sized rectangles of different colors. The eye is led from one group of color notes to another at varying speeds; at the same time contrasted with this endless change in the minor motives we have a constant repetition of the right angle theme like a persistent bass chord sounding through a sprinkle of running arpeggios and grace notes from the treble.

In a letter written shortly before his death Mondrian wrote, "true Boogie-Woogie I see as similar in intention to mine: destruction of melody (natural aspect)-construction through continuous oppositions of pure means. Dynamic rhythm."

James Johnson Sweeney



*Victory Boogie-Woogie* in Mondrian's studio. New York. 1944.

# MUSEUM NOTES

## STATEMENT OF ACQUISITIONS PROCEDURE

At a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art, held on March 29, 1945, it was considered desirable to make the following statement in reference to the Museum's procedure regarding acquisitions:

The Trustees act on the belief that proposals for acquisitions should be made only by experts who are thoroughly conversant with significant achievements and trends in modern art throughout the world. The Trustees, therefore, have always delegated the responsibility for recommending new additions to the Museum's collections to the heads of departments, in whose judgment the Trustees have placed their confidence. All proposals made by the department heads and all proffered gifts, after the approval of the department heads, are submitted to the Committee on Museum Collections (formerly Acquisitions Committee) which consists of ten members and includes such experts as Alfred H. Barr, Jr., James Thrall Soby, Miss Agnes Rindge, the Chairman of the Art Department of Vassar College, and Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr., the Director of the Addison Gallery of American Art at Andover, Massachusetts.

Mr. Barr and Mr. Soby are Trustees of the Museum and Mr. Barr has either met with or been a member of the Acquisitions Committee since the Museum was founded. Between 1943 and 1945, acquisitions were specifically recommended to the Committee by Mr. Soby who was Director of Painting and Sculpture. During that period Mr. Soby acted in close cooperation with Mr. Barr.

Although certain works proposed for acquisition by heads of departments occasionally have been declined by the Committee on Museum Collections, the simple fact is that, with the single exception noted below, no object has been purchased by the Museum without the approval of the head of the department concerned. Thus, for example, all purchases in the fields of painting and sculpture from

1929 to 1943—with the exception of four pictures purchased in 1938 during Mr. Barr's absence abroad—were approved by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. or his representative, and from 1943 to 1945 by James Thrall Soby. In the same way all acquisitions made for the Museum today must have the approval of the present Director of Painting and Sculpture, James Johnson Sweeney.

The above stated procedure for acquisitions to the Museum's collections has been followed in the past and is now being followed, and no change from it is contemplated.

## PUBLICATIONS

*Georges Rouault: Paintings and Prints*, by James Thrall Soby. This full length survey includes all phases of Rouault's steadfast career from his student days in Gustave Moreau's studio to the present day. The book covers his paintings from 1893 to 1939 as well as the impressive series of prints to which he has devoted more time than any other contemporary painter. 132 pages; 128 plates (3 in full color); cloth \$3.00; paper \$1.50.

*Power in the Pacific*, a booklet published for the Museum by William E. Rudge's Sons, 32 pages, fully illustrated with photographs and text from the exhibition. (See page 16) Cloth \$1.00; paper \$.50. No members discount.



Martha Graham in *LAMENTATION*, Photographed by Barbara Morgan, included in the Modern American Dance Exhibition.



## EXHIBITIONS

**Piet Mondrian:** Mar. 20–May 13. Sponsored by the Netherland-America Foundation. Directed by James Johnson Sweeney, assisted by Margaret Miller.

**Georges Rouault:** Apr. 3–June 3. Directed by James Thrall Soby.

**Modern American Dance,** Photographs by Barbara Morgan: Mar. 27–Apr. 29 in the Auditorium Gallery. Prepared for the Inter-American Office of the National Gallery of Art for circulation in Latin America and shown in New York prior to its tour.

**Robert Edmond Jones:** Apr. 10–June 24 in the Dance and Theatre Design Gallery, Auditorium.

**Paul Strand, Photographs 1915–1945:** Apr. 24–June 10.

**What is Modern Painting? and Creative Photography:** Mar. 6–Mar. 25. Second and third in the series of small exhibitions produced in quantity for purchase and designed especially for community organizations, educational institutions, and other groups interested in the contemporary arts. In terms suited to the amateur, *Creative Photography* points out the wide range of opportunities open to the person who understands the camera's potentialities and knows how to make use of them. It is illustrated by the work of noteworthy American and European photographers. Twelve heavy cardboard panels, 30 x 40", includes 25 enlarged photographs and many smaller ones illustrating technical points. These pictures are reproduced by an extraordinarily accurate process which retains, more than any other method of mechanical reproduction, the quality of the original prints. They are accompanied by brief printed text and explanatory diagrams. Boxed in corrugated board for shipping, the exhibition is for sale at \$25 plus transportation charges based on approximately 45 pounds. *What is Modern Painting?* sells for \$60.

## MEMBERSHIP

The Museum welcomes three new Life Members: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Church, and Mrs. Edward Davies Tenney. The fees for Life Membership are added to the Endowment Fund, thus permanently increasing the effectiveness of the Museum's general program. This support is greatly needed and appreciated. Other membership gains now place membership enrollment at an all time high—on March first there were 8427 recorded members. This significant growth in membership reflects the steady interest in the activities of the Museum of Modern Art and the desire of friends of the Museum to participate in the many exhibitions and special events.

In April there will be a change in the \$10 resident membership privileges. Increased printing costs and paper shortages have made it necessary to eliminate the Museum publication which has been one of the privileges of this classification. Otherwise the advantages are the same. Also at the January Meeting of the Board of Trustees, it was voted to establish the Life Membership at \$1000.



Hyman Bloom: *THE SYNAGOGUE*. 1940. 65¼ x 46¼". The Museum of Modern Art, acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.

We quote from the Worcester Art Museum News Bulletin:

"The winners of the first and second prizes in the exhibition of *Contemporary American Paintings*, which will remain on view through March 18, have been announced by the Trustees.

"The first prize of \$500 has been awarded to Hyman Bloom for his richly colored and emotional painting, *The Synagogue*. Mr. Bloom, who was born in Latvia in 1913, has been a resident of Boston since 1920. For a time he worked on the WPA Art Program and was one of eighteen artists included by the Museum of Modern Art in the exhibition, "*Americans, 1942*." Coon, a painting of fine texture and design by Everett Spruce of Austin, Texas, has been awarded the second prize of \$300. Mr. Spruce, a member of the Department of Art at the University of Texas, was born in Arkansas in 1907, has studied at the Art Institute of Dallas, and was assistant to the Director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. He was also included in the exhibition, "*Americans, 1942*."

The jury of three consisted of Dorothy Adlow, critic of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Jean Charlot, artist, and James Johnson Sweeney, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art. "*Americans, 1942*" was directed by Dorothy C. Miller, Curator of the Department.

## POSTSCRIPTS TO "PICASSO 1940-44"

### Picasso commissioned a lieutenant?

On the day the January 1945 *Bulletin* came off the press it was reported in New York that Picasso had accepted a commission as war artist with the rank of lieutenant in the French Army and would shortly leave for the front. The official account makes clear Picasso's role which is not so dramatic as has been rumored but is nonetheless interesting:

"The French Press and Information Service, An Agency of the Provisional Government of the French Republic. New York, Feb. 10, 1945. For immediate release.

#### "FRENCH PAINTERS MOBILIZE FOR MILITARY ART DUTY"

"A first-hand opportunity to record the dynamic themes of war is being offered to a number of French artists, who are to be commissioned as army lieutenants and sent to the front on temporary missions for this new branch of military service. This official department of war art was created at the instigation of General Charles de Gaulle.

"The army painters, who will be under no obligation to furnish the state with any particular number of paintings or sketches, are to be permitted complete freedom of expression.

"A special committee, headed by Adienau, widely-known architect, and assisted by the famous Pablo Picasso, Pierre Daragnes and Georges Fautrier, has been entrusted with the task of choosing these artists."

### Picasso and the New Masses

In the article "Picasso 1940-44", after giving detailed references to Nazi-Vichy attacks on Picasso, the writer quoted a couple of leftist criticisms of his recent art and went on to say (page 8):

"... twenty-five years ago—long before Hitler—Lenin also denounced 'the infantile disorders' of the Cubists and Futurists. Recently, when the *New Masses* published Picasso's communist declaration, it did not praise his new paintings. Artists and writers who are caviar to the public of their own generation can rarely be of much use to totalitarian dictators who usually prefer demagogically to flatter popular prejudices about art..."

Virginia Shull, Managing Editor of the *New Masses* writes (we quote her letter in part):

"I should like to say that I was more than slightly annoyed by the conclusions you drew about *New Masses'* opinion of Picasso on Page 8. You imply that because we published a statement by Picasso and did not at the same time accompany it by an express criticism of his exhibition in the Liberation Salon, that we did not approve his new paintings.

"A political statement is a political statement. A critique of an exhibition is quite another thing. It is only fair to us to wait for comment before you impute judgments on our part."

The Museum's *Bulletin* was published three months after the *New Masses* had received Picasso's statement but the *New Masses* had by then made no comment on Picasso's recent art. Now, one is informed, the *New Masses* does not in any case concern itself editorially with art criticism.

The *New Masses*, however, is to be congratulated on publishing "Picasso Explains" by Pfc. Jerome Seckler in its March issue. This seems to be a thorough, conscientious and objective report of two conversations with Picasso in which Mr. Seckler asked him at length about the relation between his art and his politics. It is perhaps the longest and most important interview with Picasso since Christian Zervos' historic *Conversation avec Picasso* of 1935. We quote several sentences which answer, for the time being, the question raised above, namely, will Picasso follow the Party line which urges or even requires artists to be enjoyable or at least intelligible to the people as a whole, or will he paint as he wants to, disregarding popular or political considerations?

"I asked," (writes Seckler), "Why do you paint in such a way that your expression is so difficult for people to understand?"

"I paint this way," Picasso replied, "because it's a result of my thought. I have worked for years to obtain this result... I can't use an ordinary manner just to have the satisfaction of being understood. I don't want to go down to a lower level.

"You're a painter," he continued, "you understand it's quite impossible to explain why you do this or that. I express myself through painting, and I can't explain myself through words..."

And, further on:

"... if I were a shoemaker, Royalist or Communist or anything else, I would not necessarily hammer my shoes in a special way to show my politics."

A. H. B., JR.



## POWER IN THE PACIFIC

[An exhibition of 156 stirring war photographs in mural size, assembled by Captain Edward Steichen, chief of Naval Aviation Photography, and arranged in dramatic sequence to tell the story of the men, the ships, and the planes participating in naval action in the Pacific, was shown in the second floor galleries from January 23 to March 18. The following review by Henry McBride, critic of the NEW YORK SUN, best sums up this striking and memorable exhibition. Ed.]

*"It is an awesome experience to view the 'Power in the Pacific' exhibition; uattle photographs of our navy in action on the sea and in the sky. More than any records that have previously come to us these photographs confront the spectator with the realities of modern warfare and compel his participation. In one sense it is not an art show at all. It seems to strike deeper into the soul than any consideration of technics might do and resolve itself into the primeval study of mere life and death.*

*There is no relief anywhere in this grim presentation. The sense of threat, of danger, begins at once with the ocean views intended to place you at the scene of action, but giving you an ocean raging with the violence of Conrad's 'Typhoon' and proceeding with accumulating power to detail the cannonading of the battleships, the roaring takeoffs of bombing planes from the decks of the carriers (something that no amount of familiarity ever accustoms you to, said Capt. Steichen, whom I met by chance and who went around the show with me), the intense seriousness of the young pilots making ready for a flight, the still greater tensely of the men left behind and waiting for news of the expected combat, and finally the return of the victors with the wounded and the dead, the improvised hospital in the room where the boys had so shortly before breakfasted, and last, the mass burial at sea of the heroic victims.*

*There is plenty of technic in all this. Oh, yes, there is camera magic in all these photographs if you have the heart for it. All the known devices and some that you never heard of have been employed with skill. There is the texture of the water, the transparency of the skies, the miraculously lucky timing of a shot that shows an enemy bomber sinking beneath the waves, the deadly fatigue of Marines just returned from a two-day fight, the wounded airman being tenderly lifted from his plane after a landing on the U.S.S. Saratoga, and above and beyond all this the sense of the immensity of the power employed by our forces and its invincibility. There is masterly technic in the showing, but just now who can see the technic? The thing is too close to us.*

*Capt. Steichen, who assembled and arranged this impressive collection and who probably knows as much about photography as anybody in the world, seemed just as averse to talking technic as I was. Instead he dwelt upon the nobility of the young fighters he had known, many of them now numbered among the lost, and his constant astonishment at the quick change of the youngster into the serious adult soldier once his actual service began. 'And aren't they handsome?' said he, indicating a photograph of a group of several hundred of them in a hall somewhere, and all of them laughing obligingly for the photographer. 'They're magnificent. And so strangely similar in type, don't you think? You might easily believe them brothers.'*

*That is the disturbing thing about the picture. They are brothers. Our brothers."*

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